

Bright spark at your service

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EACH of us has their favourite tradesman story: the tardiness, the poor service, the outrageous fees. They're almost always a horror story.

Electrical contractor Joshua Nicholls will have none of that. "We're a service industry and I'm determined to change these old perceptions. I'd say they're fantastic technicians but not always wired for customer service.

"I'm building Platinum Electrical to deliver white-collar service in a blue-collar industry."

Nicholls may have started as every other "man in a van" trade business, working out in the field during the day and completing paperwork at night in his parent's garage, but the Blacktown-based electrical contractor has used his white-not-blue mantra to great effect.

Platinum Electrical boasts a turnover of more than \$3 million a year, more than 30 staff as well as a contingent of newly franchised vans across Sydney. Nicholls, who was just 22 when he started in 2001, says: "We've grown 1000 per cent in five years. It's a good start."

A strong desire to be their own boss appears to be characteristic of many blue-collar tradespeople. Walk on to any building site and you will see dozens of independently owned contractor businesses — plumbers, electrical contractors, carpenters, tilers, etc. Unlike Nicholls, most are sole traders, perhaps with two or three "subbies".

"I always wanted to run a business; not just be self-employed. My desire to go into business came when I was an apprentice. It came from watching my boss. Whereas I had to clock on at 7am, he would turn up some time after 8.30, cut up some fruit and retire to his office. He had figured out work-life balance. I wanted that."

Not surprisingly, Nicholls says none of his training prepared him for business. "I was the consummate technician; I thought that was enough to be a good business person. I didn't have any ambition to be off the tools."

Once established, Nicholls found the challenge wasn't finding enough customers, but finding time. It's the scourge of many small-business operators across the trades — cabinetmakers, flooring specialists, roofing specialists — they all become victims of their own "busy-ness".

"Going into business was like becoming an apprentice in a whole new ball game. I had three or four vans; I was up to 2am doing job sheets; I didn't have a life, so I found a business coach



His own boss: Joshua Nicholls says he is developing Platinum Electrical 'to deliver a white-collar service in a blue-collar industry'

Picture: Bob Finlayson

These entrepreneurs are hard-wired for success

Small business

JAMES Tinslay, chief executive officer of the National Electrical and Communications Association, says the industry is replete with budding entrepreneurs.

"It's a characteristic of electricians, much more than plumbers, who need a greater investment in equipment, to set up as independent contractors. It's relatively easy for a licensed electrician to open up accounts at a couple of electrical wholesalers and establish a

who, you could say, switched on the light bulb in my head. He spoke in terms of leveraging the business."

Like any service business, a key top-line metric is billable hours. Leverage is all about minimising the non-billable hours; maximising the billable.

"It's a shift of mindset. Typically blokes work long hours, but are consumed by non-billable activities: payroll, job sheets, quotes, ordering materials. Once you work out that all of this can be systemised, you can free up your time."

contracting business. Most have no formal (business) training — many are hand-to-mouth operations."

Stephen Keighery of online directory Home Improvement Pages says he has 27,000 trade businesses on his books. He believes trades people are early adopters of technology. "They were, after all, the first to use the mobile to great effect as a business tool. We are noticing that the more entrepreneurial ones are adding value to their websites. We've seen our members use internet

Nicholls says this was his defining moment where he identified exactly which aspects of the business he could progressively leverage himself out of. "The next step was to build a management team to do everything and to build the business."

A healthy penchant for risk-taking is another essential tool for an entrepreneur. It is generally what separates the mum-and-dad businesses from the serious entrepreneur.

"I worked on the principle of 'make the space and you will fill it,'" Nicholls says. "Most opera-

technology to improve the content and search ranking. They get leads from the internet through paid search to Google AdWords. They understand that they can get high returns for little cost online."

It's tricky to generalise about what makes a successful contractor because there are so many different facets to the business. In keeping with Joshua Nicholls' philosophy, those who build successful businesses surround themselves with good mentors. He says: "Unless you're a one-man operation, you

tors in the trades are too frightened to take on new staff or to buy another van because they're worried they won't have enough business to justify the investment. I saw it as a powerful motivator to create new customers."

The blue-collar and the white-collar divide has as much to do with perception as reality. For sure some tradies don't do themselves a service, but when was the last time you had a lucid discussion with a white-collar web developer?

Nicholls says his mission has been to "radically" alter percep-

need to put away the tools as soon as possible. As soon as you hire your first tradesman, it's time to start phasing out of the fieldwork and start devoting yourself to the financial, HR and marketing issues that determine success in this or any other business venture. They need to think like business people, not trades people."

Once you go into business for yourself, you're no longer a technician, you're a business owner. Technicians work for you.

Morris Kaplan

tions. "It's our unique selling proposition (USP); we have a highly professional corporate image and we have a team that has a customer service focus. Our thing is: On Time Guarantee. Our staff is always on time."

Nicholls has been innovative in delivering on the promise. "We use technology to great effect. It's my No 1 passion; leveraging using technology. We're completely web-based; using wireless penpads from site, enabling the electronic integration of job sheet details with management software. We want to make the

customer experience memorable. We even have our tradesmen put on foot protection and bring their own mats. Our entire business model is built around relationship. We wanted to distinguish ourselves from the competition; to set a high-water benchmark in customer service."

Nicholls says his business learning comes from his coach and "copious" reading. "I realised my leadership had to grow before the business could grow. I learned to delegate. I now coach my people to build their business acumen. This is a business, not a trades shop."

Nicholls says that for the immediate future he sees franchise as a growth vehicle.

"There are a lot of good technicians who can become good business owners. We've developed a 'business in a box' solution, which allows operators to focus on service delivery. I'm looking at 50 franchises and 150 vans on the road for Greater Sydney in five years."

He notes that the biggest issue facing tradespeople wanting to move into business is their ability to delegate. "It's something people have to practice at."

"I'm finally now doing business for the very reason I got into business: to have a lifestyle of choice, to have the flexibility."

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